

“Daring to Enact Solidarity, Trust, & Belonging”

Shannon Smythe

April 25, 2021

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

Our scripture passages for today are both familiar. Perhaps they bring you great comfort. Perhaps they help you define the essence of your faith. If that is the case, then praise God. Whatever your thoughts on these scriptures, I invite you to consider them anew with me this morning. And I pray that God’s Spirit would take the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and do what only God can do: provide comfort where it is needed and challenge where it is called for. Amen.

In this Easter Season, with our call to dance again, dances of hope, justice, and love, I hear in today’s scriptures a beautiful yet deeply challenging vision of following in the footsteps of our Good Shepherd. In John’s Gospel we hear that Jesus is not the hired hand but the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The epistle of 1 John picks up the same themes, language, and imagery of the Gospel of John, now directing Christian communities to love not with words and speech but in action and truth. How? By loving one another, by not refusing to help those in need, radically giving of our own lives for them, just as Jesus so loved us.

But what does it mean that God in Christ is our Good Shepherd? We don’t live in a culture where shepherding imagery holds a lot of meaning for us. So let me reframe it for you this way: This is imagery that conveys God’s deep solidarity with us. Whatever the circumstances, God is present, caring for and protecting us. But shepherding imagery speaks also of the deep intimacy God has with us. A shepherd knows all the particularities of each of the sheep in the flock. The sheep belong to the shepherd, and the shepherd belongs to the sheep. Through all of the time spent together, through thick and thin, their separate identities have been deeply connected and intertwined with one another. This results in a very real and very deep sense of belonging. What is the basis for such belonging? The solidarity of the shepherd with the sheep and the resulting trust it engenders from the sheep to the Shepherd. The trust and solidarity between the shepherd and the sheep create the belonging they have together. And belonging, as sheep to the Good Shepherd, trusting in the deep solidarity of the Good Shepherd with us, becomes transformational for the sheep.

Solidarity, trust, and belonging are the ingredients that empower us sheep to dare to dance the dance of our Good Shepherd—to love others in the way that the Good Shepherd loves us.

In contrast, solidarity, trust, and belonging are the missing ingredients in the scenario of the hired hand and the sheep. The hired hand and the sheep do not belong to one another. When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, they forsake the sheep and run away. The hired

hand is there to watch the sheep only because they have been hired to do so. For pay, they will enact duties, but only to a point. When things get too hard, they are out of there.

Praise God that God is not our hired hand. Quite the opposite! In scripture, we discover the transformative and deeply covenantal story of God with humanity and indeed, the whole of creation. God covenants to be our God, no matter what, through thick and thin. God says, I will be your God. Period. Full stop. God in Christ enters into the danger and darkness with us in the incarnation. Jesus is our Good Shepherd, in full solidarity with us. When the wolf comes, the Shepherd is there willingly laying down his life for the sheep. And from this solidarity, the sheep belong to the Shepherd and trust the Shepherd. Then, when we hear the voice of the shepherd calling us to dance, we follow and are transformed.

The contrast between the Good Shepherd and the hired hand is important because, as Rev. Dr. Roger Gench says, it illustrates “the antithesis between deeply relational notions of shepherding and transactional notions exemplified by hired hands.” When our relationships are constructed as transactional, that is, when they are based in negotiations and prescribed conditional relations between two parties, then transformation cannot take place. The hired hand cannot transform the sheep.

Here’s the thing: the way of the hired hand is the way of the world. It is not God’s way. It is transactional, conditional, and non-transformative. And the truth of the matter is that we all have been enculturated into this way of being in relationship. The unfortunate result of this in the church is that we often make the mistake of trying to build belonging together without the foundation of solidarity and trust. Then, we are surprised when there is no transformation.

If I am sounding philosophical, please hang in there with me. Because what I want to share with you is this: if we are called to be like the Good Shepherd, when we see our siblings in need—if we are called to love and lay down our life for the other, as God in Christ has done for us—but we live in a world that operates on hired hand way of being, then we are not going to know how to join the dance of love that God calls us to. We are going to try to do the dance of love based on the ways of the hired hand.

So, let us consider how God in Christ actually lays down his life. Let’s start from the incarnation. God enters our story as a little Jewish baby boy. In this way, our story becomes Jesus’ story so that we can enter God’s story. The early church theologians said it this way: God became human so that we could become divine. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson says that the Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood. Bryan Stevenson would call this God becoming proximate with us. God found the most embodied and relational way of getting to know us and of us getting to know God: by becoming human just like us and experiencing every facet of human life. When we look at Jesus, we see our experience reflected back at us. Jesus wept. Jesus was hungry. Jesus experienced temptation. And we have had all of these experiences, too. Jesus enacts solidarity with us all the way to the point of willingly dying by our broken, violent systems, rather than give up bringing God’s way on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus feeds us with his very body. He breaks bread with us. Last week, we learned that he let the disciples touch his resurrected body. This week, we

learn that Jesus belongs to us and we belong to him by the Spirit he has given to us and by following God's way. With this belonging, we are transformed and empowered to love in action and with truth.

And so as we hear, during this Easter Season, the call to dare to join God's dance of love for the world, we are really hearing the call to join God in the transformation brought by Christ's resurrection. But when we use the language of loving one another and laying down our life for our friends in need, we can very easily romanticize the notions and hold them out at arm's length so they only ever remain as those nice Christian-eeze words said at church.

So let us consider it this way. As we anticipate, for some of us, a return to in-person worship, and as all of us continue to get to know one another—me, as your still new designated pastor, called to help you transform and revitalize, and you, with your hopes that the conflicts and trials of the past would not dictate the future of the congregation, let us together renew our commitment to discovering, perhaps anew, what it means to have a true sense of belonging together. Why? Because you can't transform something where there is no sense of belonging. Westminster is longing to be transformed. But here is the truth. We can't do that work together where there is no sense of belonging. And the ingredient we need for that belonging to exist is trust. Trust has been broken in the past at Westminster. And trust must continue to grow between me and all of you. These are key ingredients, crucial building blocks, behind our ability to join God's dances of love, justice, and hope for our community and for us to join together with others who want to dance God's dances, too. May God's Spirit develop trust and belonging among us. Amen.